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SUBJECT: AMID THE TRAGEDY OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN T&T, A TROUBLED
POLICE FORCE

REF:

1.(SBU) SUMMARY: The arrest of T&T businessman Inshan Ishmael apparently on an initial charge under the Anti-Terrorism Act, for distributing unlawfully printed leaflets, has at best deepened the public's cynicism toward the police and at worst led to allegations of dictatorship and repression of the people's fundamental rights and freedoms. At the same time, public concern with the level of crime and violence is verging on hysteria, particularly following some high-profile murders and kidnappings. The belated decision of the police to declare all-out war on the criminals, only after one of its own was brutally murdered, has added to the public's cynicism and frustration and to some confusion as to which is worse: a do-nothing police or a police that shoots first and asks questions later. END SUMMARY.

"WHAT A JOKE?"

2.(U) On January 23, a squad of some four or five police vehicles with a sizeable number of officers reportedly descended on the home of Indo-Trinidadian Inshan Ishmael and hauled him off to a police station for 15 hours of interrogation which included a strip-down-naked body search. In the press, Ishmael has been variously described as a businessman, a social activist, radio broadcaster and TV talk-show host on Trinidad and Tobago's new Islamic TV channel.

3.(U) Throughout January, Ishmael had mounted a national campaign to have businesses and other organizations "shut down" on January 25 and 26. The "shutdown" which was largely observed in Central, a heavily Indo-Trinidadian area, was intended as a very visible protest designed to rally government and public to the fight against the tide of crime and violence sweeping the country. Yet, according to Ishmael's lawyer, Ishmael was initially charged with violating the Anti-Terrorism Act, a statute which carries a minimum penalty of 20 years imprisonment. Whether this is an accurate account of what motivated the contingent of police to make the arrest, the charge was ultimately downgraded to a simple misdemeanor violation of the regulation governing the distribution of handbills, a very minor offense which normally goes unheeded by the authorities.

4.(U) By all accounts, Inshan Ishmael, a Muslim and apparently a member of Winston Dookeran's recently-created opposition Congress of the People (COP) party, has never demonstrated any terrorist leanings and does not have a history of incitement to violence. Following in the tradition of peaceful democratic protest, he distributed leaflets and pamphlets advocating for the "shutdown." In addition, Ishmael urged the public to attend a mass rally against crime, at a suburban Port of Spain venue, scheduled for January 27. The permit for use of the venue was subsequently revoked by the local council which is controlled by the ruling People's National

Movement (PNM), allegedly for political reasons.

5.(U) Without exception, editors and political commentators blasted the police for its "keystone cops"-type behavior. "What a joke," screamed one headline; "The wrong message sent" was the more sober assessment of a high-powered lawyer and Independent Senator in a guest editorial. Some analysts went so far as to accuse the government of instigating Ishmael's arrest. However, in the face of such stinging rebuke, the government quickly distanced itself from any implied link with the arrest, in the hope that any subsequent court proceedings over the misdemeanor charge would bring an end to the matter.

6.(U) The opposition political parties saw even more sinister motives behind the Ishmael arrest. First Winston Dookeran, Political Leader of the COP, and then Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Parliamentary Opposition Leader of the United National Congress (UNC), sought meetings with President George Maxwell Richards. They complained to him of a creeping dictatorship in the country and increasing repression by the Government of the people's fundamental political freedoms and human rights. Although they asked him to intervene, Richards has taken no action so far.

CRESCENDO OF CONCERN OVER CONTINUING HIGH CRIME

7.(U) Public concern over crime has risen sharply during the past two months, spurred by a number of high-profile murders and kidnappings. In December, Vindra Naipaul Coolman, Chief Executive Officer of the Xtra Foods Supermarket Chain, was violently kidnapped for ransom and has yet to be found dead or alive, while Burt Allette, a local councillor representing the PNM, was brutally murdered. Then, in January, heavily armed and well protected gunmen

PORT OF SP 00000138 002 OF 003

burst into the home of Police Constable Elizabeth Sutherland and executed her, her husband, her daughter and a family friend with bullets to the back of the head. At the same time, the newspapers carried lengthy interviews with women who had been kidnapped and lived to recount their experience of unimaginable pain and physical and psychological outrages perpetrated against them.

8.(U) In the past, editorial writers and news analysts have tended to attribute the vast majority of the 368 murders committed in 2006 and the 29 murders committed so far in 2007 to nothing more than "inter-gang warfare." However, even they were forced to modify their assumptions, in the face of the particularly senseless and horrendous murder of an elderly middle-class couple in their home, on January 30. This seemingly endless spree of violence has been accompanied by a crescendo of editorial criticism as well as public concern expressed in letters to the editor and in man-on-the-street interviews by the electronic media.

THE POLICE AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

9.(U) It is becoming more and more evident that the execution-style murder of Police Constable Elizabeth Sutherland may have triggered an attitude-change in the Police toward what the public views as an unacceptable murder rate. Immediately after Sutherland's killing, Police Commissioner Trevor Paul declared an "all-out war against the criminals," and, as if to demonstrate that he meant business, police, just hours later, killed Tor John, a suspect in the Sutherland murder, in an alleged shootout, even though John was apparently killed from behind and had no traces of gunpowder on him, which might have indicated that he had fired at the police.

10.(U) Most recently, on February 2, police officers, again alleging a shootout with criminals, killed four suspects in one fell swoop. Subsequently, it emerged that at least two of the suspects were known gang members wanted by the police on at least 20 counts of murder, and that they had actually been tried on two occasions but escaped conviction because witnesses failed to show up to testify against them. Asked to comment on the incident, Commissioner Paul

said: "if the police find themselves in situations (with criminals) which require a response in a way that could result in someone's death, then so be it!" Increasing citizen support for such strong measures parallels the public's outrage at the audacity of the criminal element. On February 6, a businessman, who had been kidnapped and robbed in 2005 and was scheduled to testify in court against his attackers, was murdered in his furniture store by three men who walked in, calmly executed him and drove away.

11.(U) There is a clear impression of growing Government frustration with its own inability to control crime. One indication is that, in recent statements, Prime Minister Patrick Manning, Minister of National Security Martin Joseph and Minister of Trade and Industry Kenneth Valley have all attempted to focus the public's mind on the fact that crime is a global problem and not one that afflicts Trinidad and Tobago alone. There has also been a tendency to spread the perception that crime-fighting is "everybody's business" and to blame the public for not assuming its share of the load. Accordingly, in a new televised public service announcement sponsored by the Ministry of National Security, the narrator shamelessly tells the viewers: "We are doing our part," and then calls on them to "now please do yours." But perhaps the best illustration of the country's frustration and its search for answers is that it recently turned for salvation to Trinidadian-American citizen Choc'late Allen, a precocious 13-year-old girl who is unusually articulate and has a well-developed social conscience. As she sat, fasting against crime in the lobby of the National Library, a stream of citizens came by to greet her and draw inspiration from her, including none other than Prime Minister Manning, UNC opposition leader Persad-Bissessar and many other luminaries.

12.(SBU) COMMENT: It is widely recognized, even within Government and police circles, that the police service is in dire need of technical training, more vehicles and even protective vests for all officers; that the police might have a better chance of defeating the criminals if there were more officers on the beat; that adequate crime-fighting legislation is sorely lacking, such as legislation to permit the use of DNA evidence (recently laid by the Government before Parliament) as well as court-authorized wire-tapping; and that the police service would benefit from stronger support on the part of what is currently a dysfunctional judicial system. However, the arrest of Inshan Ishmael and the immediate response of the police to the killing of Constable Elizabeth Sutherland demonstrate that what is perhaps in shortest supply at the highest reaches of the police service is sound leadership. Such leadership would have called a halt to the Ishmael arrest before it ever got underway, and would have recognized that to arrest someone on a terrorism charge simply for exercising his democratic rights is to make a mockery of democracy and to devalue

PORT OF SP 00000138 003 OF 003

the seriousness of terrorism at the same time. The police service cries out for leadership that would have declared war on the criminals years ago, leadership that is attuned to the public relations consequences of its actions and leadership that is able to see the police as the public sees it, cynically, and not merely through the prism of its own narrow self-interest. END COMMENT.

SWEENEY